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‘Living as a Legend: Modernist Theatricality and Stalinist Self-Fashioning in the Lifewriting of Vasilii Kamenskii’

Vasilii Kamenskii was rather fond of telling the story of his life.¹ For this self-indulgence he can perhaps be forgiven: the Russian Futurist poet, best known for his groundbreaking ferro-concrete poem *Tango s korovami* (Tango with Cows, 1913), had an unusual fate, encompassing a multitude of adventures, acquaintances and identities: orphan, railwayman, revolutionary; actor, playwright, poet; aviator, party organizer, provincial grandee; amputee, stroke victim, outsider artist. What is most interesting, however, about Kamenskii’s multiple forays into lifewriting is not so much the stories they contain, as what they reveal about the problematics of Russian literary history and identity in the first half of the twentieth century, and in particular the thorny question of the transition between the Modernist avant-garde and Socialist Realism, the official aesthetic doctrine of the Stalinist 1930s and beyond.²

¹ Savvatii Gints, Kamenskii’s friend and biographer, relates that Kamenskii liked to tell stories from his own life, often with a degree of fictional licence. See Savvatii Gints, *Vasilii Kamenskii* (Perm: Permskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1984), p. 185. I am grateful to Petre Petrov and two anonymous reviewers at *MLR* for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

² Kamenskii wrote two autobiographies, numerous semi-autobiographical poems and prose sketches, two memoirs of Vladimir Maiakovskii and a long verse reminiscence of him, multiple novels, plays and poems about Aleksandr Pushkin, Stepan Razin and Emel’ian Pugachev. Following the practice of Laura Marcus, amongst others, I will use of the terms lifewriting and auto/biography here because Kamenskii’s memoirs offer no clear-cut discernment between biography and autobiography. Cf. Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

The nature of the relationship between these two aesthetic systems has been much discussed since at least the late 1980s, when Boris Groys, among others, unsettled the widespread assumption that the avant-garde, both as a group of people and a set of ideas, was suppressed and then replaced by Socialist Realism, a wholly new and hostile aesthetic manifestation of the authoritarian politics of Stalinism.³ Since then, much attention has been paid to the affinities and genetic connections between Modernism and Socialist Realism.⁴ More recently still, however, scholars have reframed the relationship as a question of identity, exploring how people and institutions transformed their self-presentation in order to survive and even thrive.⁵ Similarly, the question that interests me here is not what Socialist Realism inherited from Modernism, but rather what sort of Modernism Socialist Realism imagined for itself.⁶ I propose that Kamenskii's life stories can shed light on the negotiation

³ See Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. by Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁴ See, for example, Irina Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic, 1890-1934* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999); Petre M. Petrov, *Automatic for the Masses: The Death of the Author and the Birth of Socialist Realism* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2015); Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Writer: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁵ For recent studies examining this question, see Pamela Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era, 1918-1928* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013) and *Utopian Reality: Reconstructing Culture in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond*, ed. by Christina Lodder, Maria Kokkori and Maria Mileeva (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013).

⁶ I do not propose to be overly concerned with the semantics of defining literary movements.

Kamenskii identifies himself as a Futurist in his pre-revolutionary career and for some time thereafter. For my part, I take Futurism to be a movement within the Russian avant-garde, itself a radical movement within European Modernism. For convenience, and because they were perceived as such and often self-identified as such, I will continue to refer to Kamenskii and his colleagues as

of artistic identity across the two eras. On one level, Kamenskii's memoirs constitute a deliberate demonstration of loyalty to Stalinism and its attendant aesthetics – they are his attempt to normalize past extravagances and forestall any accusation that he and his writing are alien to Soviet society. But this act of pragmatic self-fashioning also yields a deeper level of analysis: we can read Kamenskii's auto/biographies not just as an index of changing political and aesthetic norms, but also as a case-study for the implicit poetics of the performance of self under Stalinism and, therefore, as evidence of how this Stalinist self-fashioning diverges from the models of theatrical performativity dominant in Modernism. Kamenskii's eagerness to present himself as normal allows us to see not only what 'normal' meant in the 1930s, but also how Stalinist subjects were required to conceptualize identity in itself.

The material for my analysis comes from a close reading of three auto/biographies Kamenskii wrote in the 1930s. They are, in chronological order: *Iunost' Maiakovskogo* (The Youth of Maiakovskii, 1931), a memoir of Kamenskii's friend and fellow Futurist Vladimir Maiakovskii; an autobiography, *Put' entuziasta* (Journey of an Enthusiast, also 1931); and a later Maiakovskii memoir, *Zhizn' s Maiakovskim* (Life with Maiakovskii, written in the late 1930s and published in 1940). I will compare these accounts to Kamenskii's identity construction both in his pre-revolutionary poetry and in a

Futurists in the 1920s and 1930s. I take it to be uncontroversial to say that, from the late 1920s, the cultural system created by the Russian avant-garde was superseded by a more centralized tendency with an avowed emphasis on realism, which, although the term was not used until 1932, can reasonably be called Socialist Realism. In turn, Socialist Realism was to a significant extent a product of the changed political reality in the Soviet Union from the late 1920s, which I refer to as Stalinism, which was characterized not only by industrialization, collectivization, central planning and authoritarian control, but also by new attitudes to time, discourse, identity and the nature of the Soviet project.

precocious and highly unusual example of Futurist lifewriting, *Ego-moia Biografiia velikogo futurista* (His-My Biography of a Great Futurist, 1918).⁷

Contexts

Before exploring these sources more closely, however, Kamenskii's lifewriting should be understood in its historical context. What might have motivated a Futurist poet, whose poetic mission was supposedly dedicated to creativity and originality, to look back on his life and retell a story he had already told before both in poetry and prose? One reason is eminently pragmatic: by the early 1930s Futurism seemed at best obsolete and at worst unacceptably petit bourgeois. Memoir was one of the few ways a formerly famous writer from a discredited movement could sell any books or demonstrate their value to society. (Kamenskii did nonetheless manage to publish poetry in this period.) Kamenskii was, therefore, far from alone in this endeavour: Futurist colleagues Aleksei Kruchenykh and Benedikt Livshits turned to memoir at the same time, as did other poets with pre-revolutionary pedigree like Boris Pasternak and Marina Tsvetaeva.⁸ Angela Brintlinger has made the

⁷ Kamenskii also wrote a four-page 'autobiography' in the collection *I eto est'* (And This Is, 1927) which is too brief to be of value here.

⁸ Starting from Vladimir Maiakovskii's reworking of his autobiography *la sam* (I Myself, 1928), a considerable number of first-person histories of Futurism were written over the decade. Examples include Aleksei Kruchenykh's edited volume *15 let futurizma: materialy i kommentarii* (15 Years of Futurism: Materials and Commentaries, 1928), featuring memoirs (of sorts) from Kruchenykh, Semen Kirsanov and Sergei Tret'iakov; Il'ia Zdanevich's *roman à clef Voskhishchenie* (Rapture, 1930); Boris Pasternak's much studied memoir *Okhrannaia gramota* (Safe Passage, 1930); Kruchenykh's *Nash vykhod* (Our Emergence, 1932); Benedikt Livshits's famous *Polturoglazyi strelets* (The One-and-a-half-eyed Archer, 1933); Vadim Shershenevich's *Velikolepnyi ochevidets* (Splendid Witness, written mid-1930s, published 1990); David Burliuk's *Fragmenty iz vospominanii futurista* (Fragments

compelling argument that, for the likes of Pasternak and Tsvetaeva, the switch to autobiographical prose represented an attempt 'to constitute themselves culturally, to legitimate their own claims to cultural hegemony and cultural patrimony, and to create a "usable past" for their own present and future'.⁹ While I also treat Kamenskii's memoirs as an attempt to make a 'usable past', they and other Futurist memoirs are strikingly conformist in form and content, unlike Pasternak and Tsvetaeva's contemporaneous efforts, which are written in a recognisably Modernist style with disruptions in viewpoint, chronology and language. Far from proposing an alternative cultural hegemony, Kamenskii actively emphasizes his subordination to Stalinist models of literary history and of subjectivity.

The emergence of these new models points to the fact that the avant-gardists' turn to memoir was in part precipitated by a wider shift in the dominant temporality of Russian culture. Starting in the late 1920s, the orientation towards the future typical both of political revolutionaries and the cultural avant-garde was superseded by an emphasis on retrospection, on celebrating the existing achievements of the triumphant (and completed) revolution and in particular their culmination in

of the *Memoirs of a Futurist*, 1929). It should be noted that Tsvetaeva's autobiographical prose was written outside the Soviet Union.

⁹ Angela Brintlinger, *Writing a Usable Past: Russian Literary Culture, 1917-1937* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), p. 3. See also Donald Loewen, *The Most Dangerous Art: Poetry, Politics, and Autobiography after the Russian Revolution* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2008); Charlene Castellano, 'Andrey Bely's Memories of Fiction' in *Autobiographical Statements in Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, ed. by Jane Gary Harris (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 66-98; Walter Comins-Richmond 'The Polemics of Recollection: Three Russian Futurists Struggle over the Past', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 12 (1997), 22-36.

the person of Stalin.¹⁰ In part, this shift was a natural product of the passing of time, as October became a historical fact not a lived reality, but it was also motivated by the need to produce comprehensible and compelling versions of recent history which justified the new Stalinist ascendancy.¹¹ Eyewitness historical testimony, which had been growing in popularity throughout the 1920s as audiences demanded to hear the formerly marginalized voices of the working class, became one of the favoured vehicles for this historiographical project. There was a brief boom in memoir production, at the forefront of which were two flagship projects led by the era's pre-eminent author, Maksim Gor'kii – *Istoriia fabrik i zavodov* (The History of Factories and Plants, 1931) and the relaunch of the series *Zhizn' zamechatel'nykh liudei* (The Life of Remarkable People, 1933).¹²

¹⁰ Cf. Petrov, p. 151: 'It was an ideological axiom that socialism had arrived and that a new epoch of human history and thus been inaugurated, with its distinct character already in evidence; now it was only a matter of getting hold of and displaying the evidence. It was no less axiomatic that this epoch had already given birth to a new human specimen, the Soviet Man, and along with him a new style of life. Following this chain of deduction [...] one finally reached the axiom that socialist realism was the artistic dimension of that greater phenomenon, the all-embracing style of life in socialist Russia. To be a socialist-realist author (and a good Stalinist subject), then, implied inserting oneself in the chain of axiomatic reasoning and furnishing evidence that this was not some abstract logic but a matter-of-fact reality.'

¹¹ See David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927-1941* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 68.

¹² See Marina Balina, 'Kakoi-to neproiavlennyi zhanr: memuary v literature sotsrealizma', in *Sovetskoe bogatstvo: Stat'i o kul'ture, literature i kino: K shestidesiatiletiu Khansa Giuntera*, ed. by Marina Balina, Evgenii Dobrenko and Iurii Murashov (St Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2002), pp. 241-58 (p. 244). See also Beth Holmgren, 'Introduction' in *The Russian Memoir: History and Literature*, ed. by Beth Holmgren (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), pp. ix-xxx (p. xxii).

Whereas Pasternak and Tsvetaeva could be said to write against this tendency, Kamenskii's memoirs constitute, among other things, an attempt to write himself and his Futurist colleagues into this new history of revolutionary Russia.

The fashion for publishing memoirs in the early 1930s was short-lived, as increasingly rigid ideological strictures soon frustrated would-be memoirists. But the production of narratives of self continued to be a prominent feature of everyday life in the Soviet Union. What is more, in the early 1930s the mechanisms by which individuals could prove their commitment to Communist values were changing: class origin became less important, replaced by increased focus on how Communists revealed their true selves in their deeds.¹³ Actions were to be read as indices of inner character, but were also treated with scepticism: there was widespread suspicion that virtuous actions were used as a mask to conceal sinful inner thoughts. Individuals felt increased pressure, therefore, not least because of collective peer pressure, to give accounts of their actions which not only served as a testament to their good character, but also made clear that no deception was involved. One consequence of this, as Igal Halfin and others have shown, was a flourishing of institutional spaces for self-narration, particularly within Communist Party cells and other bureaucratic instantiations of the collective. The narratives shared in these spaces became an important tool for securing a safe place in the new polity.¹⁴ Kamenskii's lifewriting can also be seen, therefore, as a literary analogue to the everyday phenomenon of Stalinist self-fashioning – that is, as a pragmatic, but not insincere, attempt to prove his credentials in new society and to demonstrate his honesty.

¹³ Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 168.

¹⁴ See Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2003); Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies: Initiating the Bolshevik Self* (Seattle and London: Seattle University Press, 2011); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Nevertheless, Kamenskii's memoirs still stand apart from these quotidian examples, not only because they were written for a broader audience (although undoubtedly with an official reader in mind too), but because, as with the other poets-turned-memoirists, Kamenskii's life and work had already long been devoted to the exploration of ego and the self-conscious performance of identity. In fact, Kamenskii had been one of the most noted proponents and exponents of a mode of performativity widespread in the avant-garde known as life-creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*). He, like many members of the avant-garde, saw his poetic identity, both on the page and in his daily life, as the product of his creative will.¹⁵ Fully committed to both types of performativity – first Modernist life-creation and then Stalinist self-fashioning, Kamenskii is thus an excellent candidate for exploring their interpenetration in autobiography: how can Socialist Realist lifewriting accommodate and narrativize Modernist life-creation?

Modernist Life-Creation and Stalinist Self-Fashioning

The two performative systems actually have a lot in common. Indeed, the premises of avant-garde life-creation – that identity is subject to conscious control and that artistic creativity should pervade all aspects of life – were inherited and transformed by Soviet culture both in the concept of life-building (*zhiznestroenie*), which underpinned the project to create a new Soviet man, and in 'the filling of the space of life with objects of art' – the overproduction of symbols of Soviet power in

¹⁵ Cf. Irina Paperno, 'Introduction', in *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, ed. by Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 3-11 (p. 3): 'Art was proclaimed to be a force capable of, and destined for, the "creation of life" (*tvorchestvo zhizni*), while "life" was viewed as an object of artistic creation or as a creative act. In this sense, art turned into "real life" and "life" turned into art; they became one.'

Socialist Realism.¹⁶ Despite this genetic connection, however, there are also considerable differences between the performance of self in Modernism and in Stalinism. First, the Stalinist model of subjectivity posits a single 'true' identity that is synchronically and diachronically consistent. In the present, this 'real self' runs through all aspects of a person's life in public and in private; any deviation in self-presentation – for instance being a good Communist in public but not at home – is taken to be the product of a deliberate concealment which must be exposed.¹⁷ Second, the insistence on a 'true self' implied a strict prohibition on conceptualising one's identity as a performance. This insistence on ingenuousness was one of the reasons for the ubiquity of everyday self-narration in the 1930s: people needed to show not only that they had nothing to hide, but that they were so frank and open that they would be incapable of hiding anything anyway. Third, although Stalinist identity allows that individuals are capable of change – for instance, formerly hostile class elements can, with difficulty, become loyal Communists – this is understood primarily as evidence of the manifestation of an inherent true Communist self that had been obscured and which has now inevitably come to light thanks to the individual's progression towards Communism (which was itself a microcosmic re-enactment of the inevitable unfolding of the Marxist-Leninist vision of history across society).¹⁸ By the same logic, the enemies of Stalinist society, who were uncovered

¹⁶ Boris Groys, 'Bor'ba protiv muzeia, ili demonstratsiia iskusstva v totalitarnom prostranstve', in *Sovetskoe bogatstvo*, pp. 37-51 (p. 50). On life-creation and life-building, see Gutkin, *Cultural Origins*, p. 47. Kamenskii knew many of the critics at the avant-garde magazine *LEF* in which the concept of *zhiznestroenie* was theorized, but he had fallen out with them over his continued adherence to a pre-revolutionary style. See Varlam Shalamov, 'Poet Vasilii Kamenskii' in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, ed. by I. Sirotinskaia, 6 vols (Moscow: Knizhnyi Klub Knigovek, 2013), V, 216. Unless otherwise stated all translations are my own.

¹⁷ Fitzpatrick, p.92; cf. Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, p. 128.

¹⁸ As Halfin says, 'If history was the Bolshevik grand narrative, autobiography was its application to a particular life.' Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, p. 161.

with increasingly frequency over the course of the decade, had not become evil, but had concealed the fact that they were, and always had been, villains.¹⁹

We can clearly see both the synchronic and diachronic aspects of this model of the subject at work in the show trials of the 1930s, in which the accused, formerly paragons of Communist good faith, often joined their accusers in believing that their own alleged betrayal of Communism was not only genuine, but was also simultaneously both an inevitable, necessary event in the unfolding of history and a conscious choice on their part. The trial tore off the mask behind which the accused had allegedly been hiding and exposed their true anti-Soviet self as a wrecker or spy. What is more, this unmasking revealed not only that the criminal was anti-Soviet, but that they must have always been bound to be anti-Soviet. As Petre Petrov puts it, 'The show trial was the show of this *could not but*.'²⁰ As I will show, Kamenskii's 1930s lifewriting is beholden to these same logics, albeit with an emphasis on conformity not deviation.

In the 1910s and 1920s, however, Kamenskii had taken a very different approach to identity. The key difference between the performative systems of Modernism and Stalinism can be seen in the fact that they both readily employ theatrical metaphors but with very different valences. In Stalinism, the attributes of theatricality, and especially masks, were negatively marked as instruments of deception; in Modernist life-creation the theatricalization of everyday life was a welcome and essential step towards the fusion of art and life and masks were a tool of liberation. Modernist authors like Maksimilan Voloshin, Andrei Belyi and Viacheslav Ivanov all wrote works with the word

¹⁹ Cf. Kharkhordin, p. 182.

²⁰ Petrov, p. 197.

'mask' in the title and celebrated the possibility for transformation that was promised by theatrical disguise.²¹

The two different approaches to the performance of self can in fact be seen as products of a two rival currents in Russian theatre in the early twentieth century. As Oleg Kharkhordin has observed, the fact that the drama of Konstantin Stanislavskii and his Moscow Arts Theatre enjoyed official sanction in the 1930s is perhaps no accident.²² Stanislavskii not only argued for greater naturalism in acting, but encouraged actors to draw on their own experience to transform their delivery of the script into something truly personal and sincere. Just as in Stalinist self-fashioning, the performance denies that it is a performance and seeks to approximate a revelation of an inner self.²³

Stanislavskii's approach is often contrasted with that of Vsevolod Meierkhol'd, who emphasized physicality and spectacle in the plays he staged, shunning both mimetic naturalism and established theatrical conventions. However, while Meierkhol'd, who directed Kamenskii as an actor in the early years of the century, was certainly an influence on the avant-garde's approach to theatre, more significant, I suggest, was another director – Nikolai Evreinov.²⁴

²¹ See Dennis Ioffe, 'Modernism in the Context of Russian "Life-Creation": "Lebenskunst" and the Theory of "Life ⇔ Text" Sign Systems', *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 2006, 40, 22-55 (p. 37).

²² Kharkhordin, p. 274. My analysis of the Stanislavskii's significance for the period differs somewhat from Kharkhordin's.

²³ See Jane Milling and Graham Ley, *Modern Theories of Performance: From Stanislavski to Boal* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 6.

²⁴ See Tamara Boikova-Poggi, 'La théâtralité chez Evreinov et les futuristes russes', *Revue des Études Slaves*, 53 (1981), 47-57, and Silvija Jestrovic, 'Theatricality as Estrangement of Art and Life in the Russian Avant-Garde', *SubStance*, 31 (2002), 42-56.

Evreinov, a playwright and provocateur, took inspiration from Oscar Wilde and *commedia dell'arte* in calling for people constantly to invent and inhabit new characters in their daily life.²⁵ Kamenskii, who was very close to Evreinov, praised both his multiple personae and his doctrine of theatricality in a 1917 biography:

A true Robinson Crusoe of the theatre, and a Columbus of today's 'theatre for oneself', a king of directors, a wise Harlequin – the darling of the crowd, N. Evreinov, who, with a stentorian trumpet summoned us to the performance of life and gave us a new yardstick with which to measure the worth of life – theatricality.²⁶

The Futurists sought to achieve this theatricalization of life in two ways: in the first instance, Kamenskii and his colleagues accompanied their poetry with elaborate stunts and spectacles in cafes and on the streets, offering a creative challenge to conventional mores by bringing the theatre outside. More importantly for our purposes, however, the Futurists also saw theatricality as a challenge to the very notion of a unified self and often conceptualized their whole existence as a series of performances.²⁷ The charismatic and impulsive Kamenskii was perhaps the most committed to this approach. When, returning the favour, Evreinov wrote a book about Kamenskii and his theatricality in 1922, he congratulated him on being the greatest exponent of life as a work of art – 'a poet in every moment of his existence' – and lauded his many different roles in life as evidence

²⁵ See Spencer Golub, *Evreinov: The Theatre of Paradox and Transformation* (Epping: Bowker, 1984).

²⁶ Vasilii Kamenskii, *Kniga ob Evreinove* (Petrograd: Sovremennoe iskusstvo, 1917), p. 43. Quoted and translated at Sharon Marie Carnicke, *The Theatrical Instinct: Nikolai Evreinov and the Russian Theatre of the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), p. 10.

²⁷ See, for instance, Velimir Khlebnikov's poem 'Odinokii litsedei' (The Lonely Player). See Velimir Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, ed. by R. V. Duganov, 6 vols (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2000-06), II, 255.

that 'life is the object of our creative will to theatre of our Spirit of Transformation' and that theatre will help free mankind from stagnation.²⁸

Evreinov's claims are well supported by Kamenskii's own statements, not to mention his behaviour. Although he had been a professional actor as a young man, Kamenskii abandoned the stage because:

the Poet rising up in me in ardent fantasies inclined me to leave behind acting, that fake life, and go away somewhere faraway, to the mountains, to the possibilities of spring, to songs, to miracles in the glory of multi-coloured youth. I wanted to live as a legend.²⁹

²⁸ N. N. Evreinov, *Teatrilizatsiia zhizni: poet, teatraliziruiushchii zhizn'* (Moscow: Vremia, 1922), p. 7, p. 11. Compare Jestrovic, p. 40: 'It could be added that in modernism this realization, which inspired Evreinov to exclaim: "Do not be yourself," implies an even further split of *I*. In other words, it suggests that *I* is the other, thus, that the notion of self is not one closed intact unity, but a fragile formation with many faces. *I* in Evreinov's context can be understood as a construct, an interchangeable mask in a continuous role-playing. He views the notion of self as a theatrical or rather metatheatrical phenomenon. The intrinsic theatricality of *I* is played out through transformation.' The idea of life as a theatrical performance was not, of course, new in Russia and was particular prominent under the influence of Romanticism. As Iurii Lotman noted in an influential article on theatricality in the nineteenth century, theatricality had long held an attraction because of its emancipatory potential: 'The [theatrical] person was not a passive participant in the faceless current of passing time: freed from everyday life, he led the existence of a historical figure — he himself chose his type of behaviour, actively affected the world around him, perished or achieved success.' Iu. M. Lotman, 'Teatr i teatralnost' v stroe kul'tury nachala XIX veka', in *Izbrannye stat'i v trekh tomakh*, 3 vols (Tallinn: Aleksandra, 1992-93), I, 269-86 (p. 275).

²⁹ Vasilii Kamenskii, *Ego-Moia Biografiia velikogo futurista* (Moscow: Kitovras, 1918), p. 78.

In the short autobiographical poem 'Moia kar'era' (My Career, 1916) he lists his many identities – 'Poet-wise man and aviator, / Artist, performer and peasant' – and describes the symbiotic relationship of a life and verse that emerges from his all-consuming creativity:

Из жизни я создал поэмию,
А из поэмии – стихи,
И стал подобен солцегению
И композитором стихии.³⁰

(From life I made a poetic | And from this poetic – verses, | And became like the sun-genius | And a composer of the elements.)

Nor is he alone in this multiplicity: Kamenskii ascribes the same pluralistic personality to the other main subject of his later auto/biographies, Vladimir Maiakovskii. Maiakovskii's identity is so unstable that his name becomes a mask available to others:

И он – Поэт, и Принц, и Нищий,
Колумб, Острило, и Апаш,
Кто в Бунте Духа смысла ищет –
Владимир Маяковский наш.³¹

³⁰ Vasilii Kamenskii, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, ed. Nikolai Stepanov (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1966), p.84. 'Poetic' is my translation of Kamenskii's neologism *poemiia*, which combines the words *poema* (epic poem) and *poeziia* (poetry).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 108. Note that, like Evreinov, Maiakovskii is described as a Columbus, a favourite hero of the Futurists thanks to his association with new discoveries.

(And he is the Poet and the Prince and the Pauper, | Columbus, Sharp-Wit, and Apache, | Whoever searches for meaning in the Rebellion of the Spirit | Is our Vladimir Maiakovskii.)

In describing him this way, Kamenskii is building on Maiakovskii's own self-description of himself as essentially multiple personality, for instance in his article 'O raznykh Maiakovskikh' (On the different Maiakovskis, 1915) and in his debut long poem *Oblakov v shtanakh* (A Cloud in Trousers, 1913): 'И чувствую / я / для меня мало' (And I feel 'I' is too small for me).³² Maiakovskii split self was suggested by many as one of the possible reasons for his suicide.³³ Kamenskii also presents it this way in his 1931 memoir of him, but presents the suicide as a sort of purge that Maiakovskii conducted on himself: 'He shot himself. Maiakovskii – the tribune-fighter did not want to trust the other Maiakovskii – who was feeble, inconstant, weak-willed, unhealthy.'³⁴ It would seem that, in 1930s, the time for multiple personalities was over.

Performing Socialist Realist Authorship

Let us now turn to Kamenskii's memoirs, reading them as evidence both of pragmatic identity construction and of an implicit model of Stalinist subjectivity. It should be clear from the foregoing historicization of notions of identity that, although I do draw attention to inconsistencies in Kamenskii's different life stories, this is not in order to expose deception, but rather to explore the selection mechanisms inherent in self-representation. Not only were there compelling motivations for self-preservation as well as self-promotion behind Kamenskii's narration of his own life, but to

³² Vladimir Maiakovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v trinadtsati tomakh*, ed. by V. A. Katanian, 13 vols (Moscow: Khudozhesvtennaia literatura, 1955-61), I, 181.

³³ See Svetlana Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks: Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 152.

³⁴ Vasilii Kamenskii, *Iunost' Maiakovskogo* (Tbilisi: Zakkniga, 1931), p. 73.

understand Kamenskii's performance of a Socialist Realist subjectivity as disingenuous pretence would mean erroneously taking as a given the same binary identity of public persona and 'true' private self that obtained in Stalinism. Such a model not only implies unnecessary value judgments, but also fails to recognise that identity is not located in some internal pre-linguistic ego, but is constantly constituted and reconstituted in discourse.³⁵ By the same token, it would also be a mistake to equate Modernist life-creation with the performance of self-identity with performativity as it would be understood by Judith Butler or Jacques Derrida: although Modernist theatricality does posit a constantly shifting identity, this identity is imagined as the conscious product of the poet's unique creative genius, with little regard for the discursive environment.³⁶

Moreover, we should not overlook the fact that, in this instance, Kamenskii's performance of self takes place not in social interaction but in texts: he is an author as well as an actor. As such, we can profitably relate his lifewriting to Petre Petrov's persuasive recent reappraisal of the relationship between Modernist and Socialist Realist paradigms of authorship. Petrov understands Socialist Realism not as an ideology or an aesthetic, but as an 'organizing and staging of performances' in which the author of a work self-consciously downplays and even dismisses their own creative agency

³⁵ I agree with Alexei Yurchak that Kharkhordin's suggestion that the split between 'private' and 'public' spheres was a product of Stalinism itself (see Kharkhordin, p. 270) is grounded in a misguided notion that 'the speaking person is a "unified, bounded, sovereign individual" [...] whose authentic voice can be hidden or revealed rather than an identity that is constituted in discourse.' In making this argument, Kharkhordin in fact replicates some of the assumptions of 1930s models of identity themselves. See Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: the last Soviet generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 17.

³⁶ Cf. Ioffe, p. 25: 'The other important characteristic of modernism that bears a direct influence on the concept of "Lebenskunst" is a powerful shift to the hyper-individualistic "I" where everything is subordinated to the dictatorship of a character's egocentric utterance.'

in shaping its content.³⁷ Much as life-creation feeds into life-building, Socialist Realism's denial of creative subjectivity, Petrov argues, is as an outgrowth of the Modernist interest in staging the 'death of the author' by depersonalising texts and insisting on their objectivity. The two are distinct, however, because Modernists conceive of the 'death of the author' as a conscious act, 'as a kind of proto-will', whereas in Socialist Realism it is 'reduced to a purely theoretical postulate that registered a fact without proposing an act', that is, objectivity is taken as a given.³⁸

My analysis of Kamenskii's memoirs has a slightly different focus, however. First, while I do not deny the importance of self-conscious objectivism to certain strands of Russian Modernism, particularly in the 1920s, Kamenskii does not belong to these tendencies. As his memoirs attest, Kamenskii continued to proclaim the creative ego as the organising principle behind his work and the source of its value. As a consequence, my interest is not so much in the Socialist Realism's representation of the world, as its representation of the self. Second, lifewriting necessitates a more diachronic approach to the question of authorial identity than that taken, for the most part, by Petrov.

Kamenskii uses his memoirs not only to show that he is a unified subject in the present, concealing nothing, but also to demonstrate the essential unity of this identity over time. He is a good Bolshevik and Socialist Realist now, and deep down always has been, even when he appeared to be a Socialist Revolutionary and a Futurist.

How can Kamenskii reconcile this unitary transhistorical self with his previous commitment to the performance of multiple identities and its manifestation in a diverse career path? He has, I suggest, two strategies: the first is to suggest that his pre-revolutionary identities – and not least his avant-gardism – were in fact masks concealing his true Soviet identity: in those dark times, dissembling was not a crime, but a tactical necessity. The second is to imply the inevitability of his present

³⁷ Petrov, p. 176.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 9.

identity, to prove that the evolution of his personality was subject to a strict teleology which, whatever twists it may have taken along the way, was always going to lead to his present situation, in part because it was subordinate to the greater historical inevitability that produced the Stalinist present.³⁹ Thus, as suggested above, Kamenskii's memoirs demonstrate another *could not but* – the extravagant Futurist poet *could not but* have become an orthodox Socialist Realist.

This notwithstanding, in underlining the goal-bound nature of Stalinist subjectivity, I do not wish to imply that Modernist theatricality entirely rejects any idea of an immanent teleology. After all, theatricality can imply a script – and a final curtain – as well creative reinvention. For instance, one of the founding fathers of Modernist theatricality, the Symbolist poet Viacheslav Ivanov, welcomed the irruption of theatre into life as an eschatological catalyst that would hasten the apocalyptic fusion of all mankind, with each other and with God.⁴⁰ But this higher logic is very rarely political and, furthermore, it does not require the protagonist to deny their agency within its processes, but rather celebrates their wilfulness and power. Finally, the Modernist telos remains unreached in the future, whereas Socialist Realism suggests that it has already been reached.

³⁹ The need to represent personal histories teleological terms was widespread at the time. The Formalist critic Boris Eikhenbaum, writing in 1940 about the lifewriting of his colleague Iurii Tynianov, said: 'For the contemporary person, questions of personal fate are unbreakably linked with socio-historical questions. I used the word "fate" in the sense in which it emphasizes the presence of a certain inevitability or logic and supplements in this way the more neutral word "biography" [...] The historical novel of our time had to turn to "biography" – in order to turn it into something historically natural, characteristic, significant, happening under the sign not of chance, but of fate.' Boris Eikhenbaum 'O tvorchestve Iu. Tynianova' in Boris Eikhenbaum, *O proze. O poezii* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1986), pp. 186-23 (pp. 207-08).

⁴⁰ See Viacheslav Ivanov, 'Novye maski', *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. by D. B. Ivanov and O. Deshart, 4 vols (Brussels: Foyer International Chrétien, 1971-87), II, 76-82 (p. 77).

The tension between Modernist and Stalinist versions of theatricality is captured by Boris Pasternak in his famous poem 'Gamlet' (Hamlet) in *Doktor Zhivago*:

Я люблю Твой замысел упрямый
И играть согласен эту роль.
Но сейчас идет другая драма,
И на этот раз меня уволь.⁴¹

(I love Your stubborn plan | And I agree to play this role. | But there is another drama going on right now | And this time let me go.)

Pasternak, here associated, via the poem's diegetic author Iurii Zhivago, with the triadic figure of actor-Hamlet-Christ, contrasts two different unfolding plots: a divine plan for his existence and 'another drama', the interminable play of Stalinist culture in which all must follow the script whilst denying they are doing so.⁴²

In poems like 'Gamlet', and indeed *Doktor Zhivago* as a whole, Pasternak, writing under Stalin, told the story of a poet in the revolution and gave dangerous answers to questions about freedom, identity and historical inevitability. Kamenskii, pursuing a similar project in the same period, has no such desire to be contrarian. His challenge, as he seeks to prove his allegiance to Soviet society, is to create a usable past that is acceptable not only in its concrete historical details – what he did, why and with whom – but in its underlying worldview. He must make a life that had been lived under the

⁴¹ Boris Pasternak, 'Gamlet', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii s prilozheniami v odinatstati tomakh*, 11 vols (Moscow: Slovo, 2004), IV, 515.

⁴² The question of temporality is complicated here as 'Gamlet' has two authors: Pasternak, writing in 1946, and Zhivago, writing in the early 1920s.

sign of interchangeable identities and imaginative agency serve as a demonstration of a single 'genuine' identity, unified across time and subject to a grander teleological history.⁴³

Strategies of Self-Representation

I propose that Kamenskii achieves this tricky negotiation by using three strategies of self-representation, which, extending the theatrical imagery, I have labelled cast, voice and script.

Although the three strategies overlap and reinforce each other, the order I have given them reflects a general move away from the more pragmatic issues of content (who did what when) and towards an implicit model of world and self.

Cast

The rapidly shifting political hierarchies of the 1930s, and particularly the years of the Stalinist Terror when many figures in the history of the party were purged or killed, made it very difficult for historians and memoirists to choose politically correct *dramatis personae* for their retelling of recent history. Many early Socialist Realist classics had to be rewritten to remove mentions of or allusions to discredited figures.⁴⁴ Likewise, in different versions of his life, we see Kamenskii excluding different people from his story and emphasising his closeness with others (especially Maiakovskii) in order to demonstrate his integration to Soviet society and its pre-history.

⁴³ A similar channelling of freedom into obedience is evident in Kamenskii's contemporary novel-in-verse, *Mogushchestvo* (Might, 1939). Its young heroes share the aviator Kamenskii's love of nature and of flight, as emblems of freedom, but they subordinate this love to their patriotic duty by becoming Red Army pilots patrolling the border with Japan.

⁴⁴ See Brandenberger, p. 166. The mentioning of purged people was the chief cause for the banning of books in the 1930s. See A. V. Blium, *Sovetskaia tsenzura v epokhu total'nogo terrora: 1929-1953* (St Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000), p. 99.

A simple example relates to the Red Guardsmen reported to frequent the poetry café Kamenskii set up in Moscow in 1917 – obviously cited to prove that Kamenskii’s private endeavour had then met with the approval of unimpeachable revolutionaries. In 1931, in *Put’ entuziasta* and *lunost’ Maiakovskogo*, they are mentioned by name – Muralov, Arosev, Tikhomirov and Mandel’shtam.⁴⁵ By the time of the publication of *Zhizn’ s Maiakovskim* in 1940, however, Nikolai Muralov and Aleksandr Arosev had been shot for involvement in ‘Trotskyite conspiracies’, so Kamenskii clearly thought it was safer to leave the abstract ‘Red Guards’ unnamed.

Similar selection tactics are also evident in regard to literary influences. One certainly could not accuse Kamenskii of whitewashing the history of the avant-garde: at various junctures he mentions meeting writers viewed very negatively by Soviet criticism such as Dmitry Merezhkovskii, Fedor Sologub, Leonid Andreev, Mikhail Kuz’mín, Ivan Bunin and Anna Akhmatova. However, these mentions are never laudatory and at times these stars of pre-revolutionary literature used to provide a straw man for extolling Futurist virtues, which are shown to be close to revolutionary virtues, for instance in a scene in *Put’* in which Kamenskii chides Aleksandr Blok and Merezhkovskii for being distant from the people.⁴⁶

There are other figures, however, who must be excluded. These include Meierkhol’d, a significant figure in earlier versions of Kamenskii’s life who is absent from *Zhizn’*, which was published shortly after the director’s arrest in 1940. In *Put’* (1931) Kamenskii describes with excitement a meeting with Knut Hamsun, whom he calls his favourite writer; the absence of the Norwegian writer from *Zhizn’*

⁴⁵ Vasilii Kamenskii, *Put’ entuziasta* in *Vasilii Kamenskii: iz literaturnogo nasledii*, ed. by M. Ia.

Poliakov (Moscow: Kniga, 1990), pp. 385-525 (p. 522); Kamenskii, *lunost’*, p. 82. Kamenskii also suggests that other proper proletarians enjoyed Futurist works, such as the typesetters of their books. See *Put’*, p. 525, and *Zhizn’*, p. 64.

⁴⁶ Kamenskii, *Put’*, p. 441-42.

could well be motivated by the Fascist views Hamsun aired over the course of the 1930s.⁴⁷ For a similar reason, in *Zhizn'*, written in the late 1930s when Fascism was as an existential threat to the Soviet Union, Kamenskii feels obliged to be more diligent than elsewhere in distinguishing the Russian Futurists from their Italian namesakes, and particular Filippo Tomaso Marinetti, who was by then closely associated with Mussolini. Kamenskii tells us that the Futurists had wanted to write an article denouncing Marinetti but were prevented from doing so by 'the reactionary Black Hundred press', implying a continuity between contemporary fascism and the anti-Semitic tsarist society that had disapproved of Kamenskii.⁴⁸

By contrast, figures that met with increasing approval in Soviet criticism over the course of the 1930s are rewarded with a more prominent place in later memoirs. In *Ego-Moia* (1918), Kamenskii describes a visit to Chekhov's sister's house; in *Put'*, Kamenskii says that Anton Pavlovich himself was present and enjoyed the performance.⁴⁹ Figures closer to Futurism also enjoy a promotion in status by 1940: Nikolai Aseev and Boris Pasternak are both mentioned and quoted in *Iunost'*; in *Zhizn'*, when these two are thought to have made the transition from avant-garde to Soviet poets, they are praised lavishly as 'already formed masters of the word'.⁵⁰

The most important of these personal connections, however, is with Maiakovskii. Writing a memoir of Maiakovskii in 1931, as Kamenskii did, was hardly an act of political expediency: Maiakovskii, who committed suicide in 1930, was probably the most famous poet in Russia at this point, but the last

⁴⁷ *Put'*, p. 452

⁴⁸ *Zhizn'*, p. 7, p. 169.

⁴⁹ *Ego-moia*, p. 170; *Put'*, p. 407. The promotion of Chekhov may be a matter of idle boasting rather than ideology, but it should be noted that Chekhovian realism was held up for praise at that time.

See *Bolshaia sovetskaia entsiklopedia* (1937) LXI, 469.

⁵⁰ *Iunost'*, p. 59; *Zhizn'*, pp. 111-12.

years of his career had been marked by attacks from RAPP (the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), which was at the height of its influence in 1931.⁵¹ Nonetheless, Maiakovskii's fame made him a figurehead for Futurism and the most useful symbol for arguing for its place in the pre-history of Soviet culture. Moreover, Maiakovskii's notoriety guaranteed readers and opportunities to publish – always an important concern for Kamenskii.

The positive effects of Kamenskii's association with Maiakovskii increased dramatically in 1935 after Stalin described him as 'the best and most talented poet of our Soviet era'. Maiakovskii, who is treated throughout Kamenskii's oeuvre as a poetic genius, a true revolutionary and a close friend and admirer, could thereafter be used as a hook on which to sell a memoir – and get it past censorship, especially on the tenth anniversary of his death.⁵² Kamenskii's descriptions of Maiakovskii contribute to and draw from the new commonplaces of Soviet criticism, emphasising

⁵¹ Here I diverge from the opinion of Comins-Richmond, who somewhat overstates the beneficial effects writing *Put' entuziasta* and *Iunost' Maiakovskogo* had on Kamenskii's career: *pace* Comins-Richmond, Maiakovskii was not 'rapidly being canonized' (p. 28) in 1931 when his enemies in RAPP were still ascendant. In his diary at the time critic Viacheslav Polonskii said that Maiakovskii was almost forgotten, cf. 'Moia bor'ba na literaturnom fronte', *Novyi mir*, 2008, No. 2, 56-63 (p. 59). Reviews of *Put' entuziasta* did not emphasize Kamenskii's connection with Maiakovskii, nor, particularly, do semi-official statements, such as an article by Anatolii Lunacharskii in *Izvestiia* in 1933 and the entry in the *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopedia* of 1937, which place more emphasis on Kamenskii's post-revolutionary career and especially on his role in the Moscow Soviet, than on his Futurism or friendship with Maiakovskii. See Nikolai Tarasov, 'Put' entuziasta', *Novyi mir*, No. 8 (1931) 201-04 (p. 201).

⁵² Similar motives could perhaps be attributed to another close colleague of Maiakovskii, Viktor Shklovskii, who published a memoir of him, *O Maiakovskom* (About Maiakovskii), in 1940.

Maiakovskii's capacity for hard work, his love of his family and his dominant role in formulating Futurist theory; the awkward fact of his suicide is not mentioned in *Zhizn'*.

One of the emerging orthodoxies about Maiakovskii was that after the revolution he had outgrown his avant-garde youth and begun to truly represent the people. Kamenskii's close association with him gives the impression that he has followed the same path.⁵³ Maiakovskii is shown to have always already been a good Soviet poet, even at times when his actual views were likely very different. To achieve this, Kamenskii anachronistically projects the monumental Maiakovskii of Soviet propaganda back in time, describing him in 1918 as follows: 'Like an iron monument to a poet-propagandist of the masses, he stood on the stage in front of the incandescent crowd and froze like that in the general imagination.'⁵⁴ Maiakovskii speaks in the clichés of Soviet literary discourse, calling for art to serve politics, and is remarkably prescient and severe about future literary emigres.⁵⁵ In so doing, Kamenskii implies an essential unity to Maiakovskii's identity across time: his move from avant-gardist to pillar of Socialist Realism was the product not of an internal transformation, but of the removal of layers of disguise. Thus, in *Iunost'*, Kamenskii's Maiakovskii openly says "'Soon the worker's revolution will shake things up and then I will show myself.'"⁵⁶ Just as masks are illegitimate in the Stalinist present, in the anti-world of pre-revolutionary Russia, they are essential.

⁵³ See, for instance, *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopedia* (1937), XXXVIII, 549-50.

⁵⁴ *Iunost'*, p. 84.

⁵⁵ In 1917 Maiakovskii says, 'Genuine poetry should serve the proletarian revolution' (*Zhizn'*, p. 197), which is the opposite of his actual position at the time, according to Bengt Jangfeldt. See Bengt Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky: A Biography* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014), p.97. For Maiakovskii's condemnation of émigrés, see *Zhizn'*, p. 206.

⁵⁶ *Iunost'*, p. 62. The idea that the Futurists could sense the coming of the revolution, rather than being conscious of it, suggests perhaps a Futurist version of 'class instinct', the proletarian's natural

Kamenskii also aligns himself with other figures in the Socialist Realist canon, describing meetings with the painter Il'ia Repin and the writer Gor'kii – the preferred exemplars of realism in painting and literature respectively – at increasing length and with increasing ardour in each subsequent memoir.⁵⁷ These meetings with older comrades, who endorse the Futurist project's revolutionary potential, serve not only to show Kamenskii's past and present orthodoxy, but also to inscribe his life story into a larger narrative of the development of realist art and its service to revolutionary cause. Repin and Gor'kii appear as mentors, tutoring the impetuous Futurists in sober, conscious activism. They also serve as a connection back to previous generations: Repin, who is presented as the embodiment of a heroic era of resistance to tsarism, describes seeing the executions of the assassins of Alexander II, implying a political pre-history for Futurism.⁵⁸

It is notable that all these canonical figures are given ample opportunity to speak. In the first place, this allows them articulate a strict binary division of 'us' and 'them' (revolutionaries and bourgeoisie, respectively) and place Kamenskii on the right side of it. But more than this, by filling these sections of prosopopoeia with liberal sprinklings of contemporary Soviet buzzwords and catchphrases, Kamenskii uses these giants of Socialist Realism to collapse the distance between the pre-revolutionary avant-garde and the present.

bent towards revolution. Cf. Anna Krylova, 'Beyond the Spontaneity-Consciousness Paradigm: "Class Instinct" as Promising Category of Historical Analysis', *Slavic Review*, 62 (2003), 1-23, p. 16.

⁵⁷ At the time of writing of *Put'* in 1931 Repin had recently died at his home in Kuokkala, then in Finland, after refusing to return to the Soviet Union despite the Politburo's pleading; he was nevertheless held up as a model realist by official opinion. See *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopedia* (1937) XLVIII, 655.

⁵⁸ *Zhizn'*, p. 173.

Voice

As this abundant prosopopoeia indicates, Kamenskii's performance of a Socialist Realist identity was to a significant extent a linguistic exercise. The adoption of the verbal codes of Stalinism, learning to 'speak Bolshevik', was a prerequisite for individuals looking to secure their place within the new society.⁵⁹ Of course, the retrospective use of anachronistic terminology and categories is all but inevitable in writing literary histories. However, I would argue that Kamenskii deliberately avoids describing Futurism in the terms used at the time, which had taken on a negative valence in the late 1920s, and instead adopts both the style and the vocabulary of 1930s literary discourse in an exaggerated form. By so doing he normalizes Futurism, making it seem to be both closer to the present and an organic and acceptable stage in the development of Soviet culture up to that point.

In the first place, Kamenskii's 'speaking Bolshevik' is evident in his almost complete disavowal of both the neo-Romantic rhetoric and split authorial perspective that characterized his 1918 biography *Ego-Moia* in favour of simple chronological narratives – albeit ones enlivened by occasional flourishes, newspaper clippings and imagined dialogue. Although this newfound commitment to simplicity was not uncommon in Futurist lifewriting – Maiakovskii's *Ia sam* (I Myself, 1928) has been described as an 'anti-biography' for its almost polemical asceticism⁶⁰ — and although it may have roots within the left avant-garde, Kamenskii's new clarity certainly helped him seem more at home in Socialist Realism.

Second, Kamenskii's use of the language of the 1930s to describe the previous quarter-century helps him suggest an unchanging ideological position. We see this sort of programmatic anachronism, for

⁵⁹ Cf. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, CA, and London: University of California Press, 1995), p. 220, and Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, p. 21.

⁶⁰ Krystyna Pomorska, 'Boris Pasternak's *Safe Conduct*' in *Autobiographical Statements*, pp. 114-122 (p. 115).

instance, in his description of a trip to Paris in 1912, when he was as a young and glamorous aviator – and a rich one, thanks to an advantageous marriage. In *Ego-Moia* Kamenskii describes how impressed he is by the city's lights; in *Put'* he describes Paris as 'the first capital of the announcement of the commune' and he emphasizes not the city's urbane delights, but the welcome absence of 'the prison guards of Nicolaevan Russia'.⁶¹ The characteristic phrases of Stalin-era agitation are used to describe the Futurists' pre-revolutionary adventures, and thus imply their precocious allegiance to Soviet values. In *Zhizn'* Kamenskii uses the metaphor of the tempering of metal, which originated in the avant-garde but achieved popularity in Socialist Realism, to describe the ways in which popular criticism of their work toughened up the Futurists: 'Our enemies' abuse tempered us.'⁶² Similarly fashionable industrial metaphors are evident in the comparison of Futurists with engineers:

Despite you, ferocious stupidity of philistine existence, above your slushy head, we, as true engineer-enthusiasts, built steel bridges of Futurist inventiveness, in order to move along these steel bridges the procession of the culture of the future of new art. We built Futurism quite consciously and in a fairly organized way.⁶³

⁶¹ Kamenskii, *Put'*, p. 453. Such rhetoric would have not have been alien to someone of Kamenskii's class or political sympathies in 1912, but it is notable that this is all that he considers worth mentioning in his memoir.

⁶² Vasilii Kamenskii, *Zhizn' s Maiakovskim* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1940; repr. Munich: Fink, 1973), p. 50. On the metaphor of 'tempering', see Rolf Hellebust, *Flesh to Metal: Soviet Literature and the Alchemy of Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 79, and Clark, p. 166. We recall that throughout 1931 there was a very loud propaganda campaign around the steel mill at Magnitogorsk, cf. Kotkin *passim*.

⁶³ *Put'*, p. 485.

Although Stalin had not yet described writers as ‘engineers of human souls’, the phrase, which also originated in the work of the Futurists and the theoreticians of *LEF*, had long had currency and the desire to equate literature to construction, engineering or science is very typical of the 1930s.⁶⁴ Likewise, the emphasis on organization as an exemplary quality for avant-garde writers is notably anachronistic, reflecting more the centripetal tendencies of the early 1930s than the sectarianism of the 1910s.

Of particular importance in quotation above and throughout Kamenskii’s lifewriting is the emphasis on ‘consciousness’, which Katerina Clark identifies as a crucial category in early Soviet literature as one half of the dialectic between rebellious spontaneity and Party-minded consciousness.⁶⁵

Kamenskii openly subscribes to the importance of consciousness, even quoting Marx as the key to understanding the sluggish development of literature in pre-revolutionary Russia: ‘And it really was the case. “Existence determines consciousness.”’⁶⁶ Here and elsewhere Kamenskii uses quotation marks to signal that he is using, quite self-consciously, the language of contemporary theory; in fact, quotation marks around single words are so common in his memoirs that it is often unclear what exactly he might be quoting. By doing this, Kamenskii achieves two things: he helps to collapse the gap in time (and indeed politics) between the 1930s and the 1910s and he demonstratively performs his adherence to the master discourse of Soviet life.⁶⁷

At times, Kamenskii’s use of the lexicon of Stalinist ideology facilitates a rhetorical sleight of hand.

For instance, as the title of *Put’ entuziasta* suggests, Kamenskii describes his passion for creativity

⁶⁴ Cf. Gutkin, p. 52. We recall also Kamenskii’s use of the term ‘laboratory’ above.

⁶⁵ See Clark, p. 15.

⁶⁶ *Put’*, p. 438. This famous quotation is taken from Marx’s preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

⁶⁷ Cf. Yurchak, p. 67, p. 76.

and adventure as 'enthusiasm' – a term that was very popular during this period of mass mobilization, when considerable emphasis was put on commitment to a task, on a natural inclination towards excessive work and attention.⁶⁸ Still more systematically, Kamenskii exploits the ambiguity inherent in the various words for bourgeois, such as *meshchanskii*, *burzhuaiznyi* and *obyvatel'skii*, which can be used both in a Marxist sense, to denote the class historically prior and intrinsically hostile to the coming proletarian revolution, and as a description for philistines with a reactionary distaste for innovative art.⁶⁹ While Kamenskii and his colleagues certainly saw their artistic insurrection as having a political aspect, by invoking the catch-all common enemy, the 'bourgeoisie', he effaces the considerable difference between the goals, tactics and challenges of political and poetic rebels before 1917. The bourgeoisie is portrayed as a pervasive bogeyman responsible for any setback in the Futurists' personal or professional lives, such as failures in love, bad reviews and a lack of attention.⁷⁰ Their suffering at the hands of the 'bourgeoisie' implies a Manichean view of pre-revolutionary life in which a common enemy unites the Futurists with the Bolsheviks, as well as other victims of tsarist cruelty, such as Jews.⁷¹ The Futurists' political circumstance is presented as more important to their readers than their aesthetics: Kamenskii says that it is the Futurists'

⁶⁸ See, for example, Kotkin, p. 92. Kamenskii was praised as an enthusiast by Anatolii Lunacharskii in *Izvestiia* in 1933. See Lunacharskii, 'V.V. Kamenskii'. In his guardedly sympathetic review of *Put' entuziasta*, Tarasov argues that Kamenskii's exuberance is too scattershot to be true Soviet 'enthusiasm' (Tarasov, p. 201).

⁶⁹ Cf. Gutkin, pp. 14-15.

⁷⁰ *Zhizn'*, p. 94, p. 6.

⁷¹ Kamenskii constantly notes the presence of police in the audience during the Futurists' tour of southern Russia in 1913 and describes attempts by the authorities to ban events (*Zhizn'*, p. 79). On the conflation of the persecution of Futurists with anti-Semitism, see *Zhizn'*, p. 50.

persecution by the authorities, not their artistic achievements, which attracts radical students to them.⁷²

Script

We have seen how Kamenskii's manipulations of 'cast' and 'voice' emphasize the Futurists' closeness not just to pre-revolutionary Bolshevik aims (as they were understood in the 1930s) and experience but also to the norms of the 1930s. In fact, Kamenskii implies that prior to 1918 – the last date covered in any of his memoirs – the Bolsheviks and the Futurists had been serving a common cause. This is not groundless: Kamenskii had been imprisoned for his prominent role in the events of the 1905 revolution in the Urals and he remained consistently sympathetic to the revolutionary cause thereafter. However, as we will see from the final self-representation strategy, 'script', Kamenskii makes particular efforts to demonstrate that the Futurists always considered themselves something akin to Bolshevik agents in the world of art, producing experimental works almost solely to hasten the dual victories of socialism (in its Stalinist hypostasis) and Socialist Realism.

Moreover, Kamenskii seeks to emphasize that these victories were inevitable consequences of historical determinism. As such, the Futurists' closeness to the Bolshevik mission is further expressed in the fact that their lives were also subject to the iron laws of history. In the first instance, such submission to historical inevitability is evident in the way Kamenskii draws on Socialist Realist narratives to describe the progress of his own biography, which, in all its later versions, corresponds to the schema for the Soviet production novel proposed by Clark and to the shape of Communist autobiography evident in official publications and in internal Party accounts.⁷³ Although both

⁷² See *Iunost'*, p. 4, p. 34, p. 48, and *Zhizn'*, p. 124.

⁷³ Cf. Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd edn (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 44: 'The point of convergence that makes these disparate works [1920s works that would become part of the Socialist Realist canon] form a single tradition is the informing scheme of

Socialist Realist novels and Communist autobiographies draw on existing genres (especially religious conversion narratives), they do so in order to express the pillars of a Bolshevik worldview – a teleological model of history, the importance of political consciousness, the world-historical significance of the Revolution, the moral superiority of the proletariat, the triumph of the masses – within narratives in which a heroic individual overcomes his own ignorance and external obstacles to move from oppressive darkness towards revolutionary enlightenment and, ultimately, absorption into the collective.

The title of *Put' entuziasta* – journey of an enthusiast – exemplifies this idea of life as a movement towards a specific telos.⁷⁴ Along this journey, certain milestones must be passed, the first of which is childhood: in an attempt to seem more orthodox, Kamenskii finesses some awkward details of his upbringing. Orphaned at an early age, Kamenskii was raised by well-off relatives living near Perm'. Kamenskii suggests that felt alienated from his bourgeois family and only enjoyed real closeness with the servants: 'In the house, a nanny, a cook – living with them is easier, simpler, not frightening.'⁷⁵ Kamenskii manages to turn the relative comfort of his infancy to his advantage, using it to show his precocious affinity with the labouring classes.⁷⁶

human biography that underlies each work and has its roots in Marxist-Leninist historiography and revolutionary tradition'; and *ibid.* p. 124 (on the 1930s): 'All biographies were now standardized so that every subject's life, in both fiction and non-fiction, fit mythicized patterns.'

⁷⁴ The journey metaphor became ubiquitous in the 1930s, including in relation to the lives of individuals, such as the 1938 biography of Sergo Ordzhonikidze, *Put' bol'shevika* (Journey of a Bolshevik).

⁷⁵ *Put'*, p. 386.

⁷⁶ Both autobiographies emphasize the importance for Kamenskii of learning while in nature, outside the home. In *Put' entuziasta* Kamenskii says his nanny would read him stories before bed – an

It was a mainstay of biographies of Party leaders that, as children, they exhibited 'energy, daring, antiauthoritarianism, a strong will, and love of life and freedom' and Kamenskii also underlines, not without good reason, his impetuous rebelliousness as a child.⁷⁷ He also emphasizes his youthful anticlericalism, saying that as a child he instinctively saw the connection between the oppressive forces of tsarism and the church and would make bold, demystifying jokes at the expense of priests.⁷⁸ Such scenes are a staple of Communist autobiography and classic Socialist Realists texts like *Kak zakalialas' stal'* (How the Steel Was Tempered, 1934) in which the hero's first experience of oppression is at the hands of a vicious obscurantist priest.

The fact that Kamenskii does not conceal his non-proletarian origins, but rather openly acknowledges his bourgeois background, is a strategy with parallels in Communist autobiography, with its prohibition on concealment.⁷⁹ Instead of hiding them, Kamenskii uses his unfortunate origins to emphasize his commitment to the cause: 'True, coming from the *raznochintsy*, we were never proletarian poets, and while it may be that we had a poor grasp of the ideology of scientific Marxism, we always acted in the interests of the revolutionary proletariat, starting from 1905.'⁸⁰ Kamenskii not only emphasizes the consistency of his identity over time, but also uses a trope familiar from Communist self-narration in which the autobiographer implies that, despite being allusion, probably, to the figure of Arina Rodionovna in the biography of Pushkin (especially in Soviet biographies) – the living link between the young poet and the people.

⁷⁷ Clark, p.124.

⁷⁸ *Put'*, p. 389, p. 398.

⁷⁹ Cf. Fitzpatrick, p.92: 'concealment was the cardinal sin [...] harshly penalized and usually interpreted in the most sinister light'; cf. Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, p. 128

⁸⁰ *Put'*, p. 517. The *raznochintsy* were those in the nineteenth century who, largely thanks to education, did not belong to the peasantry, nobility or merchant class.

insufficiently enlightened about Marxism, he was instinctively on the side of the revolution even before coming into contact with conscious proletarians – in Kamenskii's case in prison in 1905.⁸¹

Kamenskii's active participation in the 1905 Revolution does not receive as much emphasis in his autobiographies as one might expect, given that it proves his credentials as a political revolutionary. This might be explained by 1905's controversial position in Soviet historiography, which necessitated careful handling.⁸² In *Ego-Moia*, written in the summer of 1917, Kamenskii gives a relatively exuberant telling of his election as a local leader of the local Socialist Revolutionary party, the takeover of a key railway station and his subsequent imprisonment. In contrast, later accounts, which do not mention his membership of a non-Bolshevik party, are more concerned with discussing the role of consciousness and the absence thereof in Kamenskii's life and in the ultimate failure of the revolution. Kamenskii puts increased emphasis on his lack of experience and suggests that it was only his enthusiasm – which was fired by contact with true proletarian workers – and the absence of proper revolutionaries which led to him being elected as a workers' deputy.⁸³ But it is this same general naivety and lack of consciousness that is responsible for the revolution's failure as a whole: 'True, there were real politicians there too – social democrats and Socialist Revolutionaries, but they were weak, "lyrical" leaders, without fire and pathos, and had no influential authority with the masses [...] It turned out that the Marseillaise doesn't mean anything without barricades.'⁸⁴ Kamenskii's own life is a microcosm of the wider fate of the revolution, which falters without the Leninist rigour that delivered the October Revolution.

⁸¹ Cf. Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, p. 120: 'Interaction with the proletarian milieu and revolutionary activity drove protagonists toward the comprehension of class relations, gradually relieving them of their petit-bourgeois character traits.'

⁸² Cf. John Barber, *Soviet Historians in Crisis: 1928-1932* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1981), p. viii.

⁸³ *Put'*, p. 419.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 419-20.

According to Bolshevik historiography, 1905 marked an awakening of the revolutionary spirit, albeit one still in need of leadership; this wider historical change is reflected in Kamenskii's own coming to consciousness. Such a moment, when natural enthusiasm is channelled into reasoned activism, is crucial to the masterplots of both Communist autobiography and the Socialist Realist novel.⁸⁵

Kamenskii's biography, however, encodes two parallel and overlapping narratives of self-realisation – his coming to be a Futurist and his coming to be a Communist. While the former is ultimately shown to be subordinate to the latter, it is striking that Kamenskii and Maiakovskii's induction into Futurism uses the metaphor of rebirth which originates in stories of religious conversion but is common in accounts of Communist self-renewal:

It was as if the day before we had been born for real and only today we had begun to live and to know the wisdom of new-birth.

The whole world seemed young, new, starting out, excited.

We, the Futurists, grew up as the infants of contemporaneity and did not know any shores in the ocean of possibilities.⁸⁶

The climax of the Socialist Realist novel and of the Communist biography is the individual's absorption into the collective, sometimes represented by the Party.⁸⁷ Whereas *Ego-Moia* ends on a

⁸⁵ Cf. Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, p. 160.

⁸⁶ *Iunost'*, p. 3. The rebirth metaphor probably originates in religious conversion narratives. See Jochen Hellbeck, 'Writing the Self in a Time of Terror: Alexander Afinogenov's Diary of 1937', in *Self and Story in Russian History*, ed. by Laura Engelstein and Stephanie Sandler (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 69-93 (p. 79). David Burliuk, who inducts Kamenskii and Maiakovskii into Futurism, plays a role similar to that of the older mentor who, in the Socialist Realist novel, tutors the young initiate in the ways of Bolshevism. Cf. Clark, p.162.

note of solitude and anxiety about the future, Kamenskii's three later memoirs end with a moment of glorious communion with the people: in both *Iunost'* and *Zhizn'* the final image is of Maiakovskii in 1918, now confirmed as a proletarian poet, setting out on the path of new achievement in the company of the masses. Unity with the collective is most evident, however, in the person of Kamenskii himself. In *Put'* he describes his experience of the October Revolution in terms very reminiscent of a Socialist Realist novel: 'In some unnoticed way I stopped belonging to myself, but I was carried along in the headlong flow of the general mass, I was carried along with a bright heart, pure and irridiscent like the morning dew, towards the wonderful future of the new socialist life.'⁸⁸

The moment of harmonious unity with the collective is connected with the October Revolution itself, which also serves as the culmination of the narrative. By passing over in silence the decade or more between 1917 and the writing of the memoir, Kamenskii avoids having to tackle the complexities of the 1920s, a period when, from the perspective of the 1930s, neither he nor Maiakovskii had the right friends, the right enemies or the right idea about the future of Soviet culture. This omission implies a false continuity, much desired by Stalinist historiography as well as by Kamenskii, between 1917 and the 1930s. Moreover, choosing this endpoint also allows Kamenskii to present the revolution as the inevitable fulfilment of Futurism's secret task:

And I knew very well that soon the proletarian revolution would bring forth its creative powers, and that new people would come, new Communist poets, but that not only didn't bother me, but, quite the contrary, with growing impatience it became interesting to await fresh waves of creation.

With the coming of October the role of Futurist as an active literary movement came to an end – that was clear.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁸⁸ *Put'*, p. 525.

We had done our job.

At that moment everything started again.⁸⁹

The claim that the Futurists saw October as the end of their poetic mission as an ‘active literary movement’ does not stand up to much scrutiny, as is evident from Kamenskii’s continuing involvement in Futurist-branded initiatives such as the *Manifest letuchei federatsii futuristov* (Manifesto of the Flying Federation of Futurists) in 1918. However, it makes clear how Kamenskii seeks to subordinate Futurism to a teleological evolution of Russian culture: it is a necessary phase in reaching the present.

As part of this argument, all Futurism’s alleged bourgeois excesses are explained by Kamenskii as temporary tactical positions adopted to help serve the revolution. He acknowledges the Futurists’ ‘formalism’ – one of the most damning critiques aimed at them:

I won’t argue: perhaps, some Futurists (and me foremost among them) were too enthusiastic in our enthusiasm for “form”, maybe we even “overdid it” but that “laboratory” was necessary for mastery, in order to make the WORD serve its genuine aim – to exalt content.⁹⁰

(Note here the preponderance of technical terms in quotation marks.) Although Kamenskii seems to be giving a *mea culpa*, he is in fact providing a justification for his actions, explaining that a seeming deviation was a historically necessary stage of evolution: pre-revolutionary formalism is framed as a means of enriching the range of post-revolutionary literature and moving it closer to its natural culmination – the creation of a realistic, content-driven literature in Socialist Realism.

⁸⁹ *Put’*, p. 517.

⁹⁰ *Put’*, p. 485.

Moreover, in Kamenskii's conception, not only does the Futurists' unconventional early work help to bring about the present, it does so in a way which is analogous to the role that Lenin ascribed to the Bolsheviks in building communism, as an insurrectionary vanguard which can accelerate the gradual course of history:

The manifestation of extremely anarchic forms in poetry, art, music, theatre had a double function: the destruction of the old art and the creation of a new one. What suited us was not a gradual, evolutionary move to new forms, but the 'revolutionary explosion' of an innovative, Futurist coup.⁹¹

Similarly, aspects of Futurism which might seem alien to the 1930s, such as the Futurists' famous rejection of the literary classics and their dandyish attire are also explained as tactics employed to frustrate and undermine bourgeois society.⁹² The verbal violence of Futurist iconoclasm is likened to revolutionary terrorism: Kamenskii compares the anthology *Sadok sudei* (A Trap for Judges, 1910) to a bomb thrown in a crowded street.⁹³

That this artistic insurrection is subordinate to the political cause is evident in the fact that Kamenskii attributes the inspiration for Futurism to the 1905 Revolution: 'Made perspicacious by the revolution [of 1905], we now knew that for a successful coup in art we needed steadfast comrades, armed with

⁹¹ *Put'*, p. 486. The term 'revolutionary explosion' is used by Lenin in his article 'Padenie Porta Artura', *Vpered* 14 (1905). Kamenskii uses the term again in a later work to describe the October Revolution. See *Zhizn'*, p. 191.

⁹² *Iunost'*, p. 51; *Zhizn'*, p. 75.

⁹³ *Put'*, p. 444.

the brilliant technology of mastery.’⁹⁴ The word ‘conscious’ is crucial here and not just because it provides another example of Kamenskii’s constant quotation of Soviet ideological discourse. Here and elsewhere Kamenskii uses ‘consciousness’ not in the traditional Marxist sense of class consciousness, but rather to denote a certain self-sacrificing foresight on the part of the Futurists about the inevitability of the dictatorship of the proletariat and its hegemony over culture.

Although the Futurists might have seemed to be doing little to facilitate proletarian revolution, Kamenskii insists that they were eagerly and confidently awaiting it.⁹⁵ Kamenskii’s confidence in the forthcoming revolution is said to be evident from the prophetic nature of works like his *Sten’ka Razin*, with its scenes of peasant rebellion, which foretells ‘the inevitability of a precisely proletarian, “commonfolk”, revolution’.⁹⁶ The implied equivalence between knowing about the future revolution and making it happen is possible because of a paradox inherent within the Marxist theory of history, which states that proletarian revolution is not just desirable, it is inevitable. Being a good Marxist is as much a matter of being conscious of the mechanisms of history as trying to actualize them. Second, for this reason and for those examined above, identity in the Soviet Union was interpreted as being rooted not in one’s actions, but in one’s thoughts: as suggested above, virtuous actions came under increasing suspicion as a potentially hypocritical ‘mask’.⁹⁷ In *Put’* Kamenskii uses a

⁹⁴ *Put’*, p. 439.

⁹⁵ See *Put’*, p. 505; *Zhizn’*, p. 191.

⁹⁶ *Put’*, p. 493. Such retrospective prescience was not uncommon among Futurists: Maiakovskii changed some lines in new editions of *Oblako v shtanakh* to suggest that he had known that October was round the corner. See Jangfeldt, p. 63.

⁹⁷ Cf. Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, p. 156: ‘In Bolshevism, which retained some of Saint Paul’s shifting of the accent from doing to believing, from the outward actor living in a world of laws to an inward subject whose will can only be scrutinized by God, the will retained its role as the principle of individuation.’

surprisingly apt religious metaphor to assure readers of his commitment during periods of seeming quietude: 'All that time, starting from 1903, I never for a minute stopped being interested in the growth of the political movement, never for a minute forgot my own active work in 1905, never for a minute cooled in my faith in the revolution.'⁹⁸ As it is what the Futurists think, not what they do, that matters, even their wildest ambitions can be adduced as evidence of loyalty: Kamenskii recalls that his fellow Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov had ambitions to build a canal between the Caspian and the Black Sea, showing the Futurists anticipating the ambitions of the era of the Belomor Canal.⁹⁹

This notwithstanding, Kamenskii's assertion that Futurism is just part of the wider work of the revolution prompts an obvious objection: why, unlike others, did they not use their literature for propaganda? And why did they not make their allegiance more obvious?¹⁰⁰ Kamenskii explains their silence as an act of revolutionary subterfuge:

We, as convinced revolutionaries, did not have the option of saying this openly, but somehow or other we revolutionized young minds, went after the bourgeoisie for our part, rebelled against the 'pillars' of our imprisoned existence, mocked 'inner' philistinism of the spirit, pushed for a new way of feeling the world, stirred up life. [...] For reasons of the 'objective conditions' of censorship it was not possible to say a real word, otherwise they would have shut us down and that would have been that.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ *Put'*, p. 493.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

¹⁰⁰ On the apolitical nature of Kamenskii's work before 1917, see Comins-Richmond, p. 35, fn. 8.

¹⁰¹ *Put'*, p. 480. Kamenskii had made the same argument 14 years earlier in *Ego-Moia*, albeit in a much more lyrical tenor. See *Ego-Moia*, p. 130.

We recall Maiakovskii's alleged promise, quoted above, that after the revolution he would reveal his true identity. He, like Kamenskii, has maintained a consistent personality across time: the Futurists are, and have always been, obedient Stalinists and good Socialist Realists.

Conclusion

In order to demonstrate how in his lifewriting Kamenskii makes his life as a Modernist function as a passport to Socialist Realist acceptability, we have traced three strategies of selection and self-representation: cast – the figures Kamenskii is seen to associate with; voice – the language he uses; and script – the internal historical logic that is shown to drive forward his life, Russian literature and the cause of socialism. In all three strategies, Kamenskii not only ensures that the content of his life is politically correct, but also that the way in which this content is narrated accords not with the aleatory theatricality of Modernist life-creation, but with Stalinist self-fashioning, with its insistence on a sincere and unchanging personality motivated by historical forces. By the measures of its time, Kamenskii's striving for acceptance can be considered a partial success: Kamenskii's entry in the *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopedia* (1937) says of him, without further comment: 'After the Great October Revolution he went over to the side of the proletariat.'¹⁰²

As for my analysis, it seems, perhaps, that it has served only to confirm the truism that the Russian avant-garde was characterized by freedom and creativity and Stalinism by coercion and conformity. Indeed it is true that Kamenskii's interpretation of their respective performative systems seem to show this to be so: his life-creation revels in possibility – all the different selves that might be, all the different worlds that might be – whereas Stalinist self-fashioning insists on a singular subject in a singular, determinist universe. Petrov comes to a similar conclusion in regard to the representation of the world: 'In a sense, then, socialist realism is modernism in reverse. The modernist text is a

¹⁰² *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopedia* (1938), XXXI, 114.

token in the symbolic exchange with the possible; the socialist-realist text is a token in the exchange with the (ideologically) given.’¹⁰³

What is more, the line between Modernism and Stalinism does not appear to be the only watershed between freedom, multiplicity and possibility on the one hand and inevitability and singularity on the other. This dividing line also seems to run between poetry and in lifewriting. Whereas each poem – and each new encounter in life – presents new opportunities for the reinvention of the poetic ego, the logic of autobiography is largely predicated not only on the consistent self-identity of the diegetic ‘I’ across time but also on the self-identity of the written ‘I’ and the writing ‘I’. This further implies a teleological structure: the story being told necessarily leads up the moment of its own creation, the moment when the narrated ‘I’ of the text must, come what may, ultimately become the narrating ‘I’. Thus, although autobiography certainly does have the potential to problematize our understanding of the relation between the writing and the written subject, it also contains the potential to paper over this and other divisions. As Laura Marcus says:

autobiography is itself viewed as the form which has the potential to resolve oppositions, for example between subject and object (hence the emphasis on the fact that the autobiographical ‘I’ both writes and is written, is the knower and the known) and between self and world. In this sense, autobiography can be seen as a Utopian form.¹⁰⁴

The potentially utopian quality here imputed to autobiography is of the same order as the utopia offered by Stalinism – it is, or appears to be, the utopia of holism, of the sealing of fissures between the ego and the world, between the individual and the collective, between the past and the present. What is more, it partakes of a logic of inevitability similar to that of Stalinism: while autobiographies

¹⁰³ Petrov, p. 152.

¹⁰⁴ Marcus, p. 16.

can seem to be full of contingency, they necessarily depict a plot with only one possible ending, the writing of the autobiography. It is another story of 'could not but', a closed loop in which the narrated self evolves into the narrating self. Not only does Kamenskii describe himself as a conscious witness of his own inevitable transformation from Modernist to Socialist Realist, but this evolution is very evidently narrated by its own end-product, the Kamenskii of Stalinism.

However, I do not wish to overstate either the affinities between the autobiographical and the Stalinist subject or the extent to which Kamenskii's lifewriting represents the absorption and subordination of emancipatory Modernism by restrictive Stalinism. To do so would, in both instances, be to underestimate the potential liberating power in autobiographical narration, in general and in the particular case of Kamenskii. Although I set out to investigate what sort of Modernism Socialist Realism imagines for itself by examining how a Socialist Realist autobiographer remembers his time as a life-creating Modernist poet (although he mentions very little poetry mentioned and even less Modernism), one could equally invert this hierarchy of identities and think of Kamenskii's Socialist Realism as yet another pose adopted in the course of his unceasing life-creation, a mask that he not only puts on in the 1930s but also projects back through his past.

There are limitations to this interpretation, of course: the 'rules of the game' of Stalinist self-fashioning were outside of Kamenskii's control, extremely strict and included a prohibition on recognising that there even was a game. Moreover, retrospective reinvention of your past self in text has a significantly less transformative effect on your experience of the world than prospective 'theatre for oneself'. However, if we follow the logic of life-creation to its natural conclusion, the distinction between inventing your present and reinventing your past starts to blur: the aim of life-creation is to bring about the fusion of art and life, so there is no hierarchy of authenticity in which the living, breathing Kamenskii is prior to the 'Kamenskii' of his many auto/biographies. As a young man, looking forward, Kamenskii could achieve the merger of art and life by turning his existence

into theatre; as an old man, looking back, he could do the same by turning his past life into a literary construct – the Modernist poet as Socialist Realist hero.¹⁰⁵ What is more, as we can see from his multiple returns to this narration of self, both in published memoirs and in the self-aggrandising anecdotes that Savvatii Gints says were his speciality, Kamenskii's retrospective transformation of self was just as restless and unceasing as his prospective theatricality had been. Kamenskii's attention had shifted to the past, but his lifewriting continued to give him an opportunity to continue his life's work of breaking down the boundary between make-believe and reality. Auto/biography allowed him to continue 'to live as a legend'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Gints says (p. 185): 'There had been so many events and unbelievable adventures and situations in that life, that his stories about what had happened often seemed like literary fiction.'

¹⁰⁶ *Ego-Moia*, p. 78.